

Investigation of Hong Kong Customers' Preference in Searching for Tourism Products Online

Grace Suk Ha Chan¹ & Lai Yung Ada Lee²

¹ School of Hotel and Tourism Management, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR

² School of Business, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong SAR

Correspondence: Grace Chan, School of Hotel and Tourism Management, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR. Tel: 852-5692-6005. E-mail: gracechansh@hotmail.com

Received: August 4, 2015

Accepted: September 2, 2015

Online Published: September 29, 2015

doi:10.5539/ijms.v7n5p53

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ijms.v7n5p53>

Abstract

Airlines and hotels focus on their direct-to-customer distribution through their websites. The inter-connectivity and inter-operability between hotels and airlines are major tools used by customers to connect with tourism organizations. An effective hotel and airline website can facilitate communication with customers, enabling the latter to share their information and to use the hotel's or airline's booking processes. The generalized use of the Internet and other information and communication technologies has significantly changed the tourism market. Likewise, easy access to the Internet has facilitated pricing transparency. Thus, customers can use the suppliers' websites to search for information and compare different products. Hong Kong is one of the cities with high rates of Internet access attributed to the purchase of airlines tickets. Given the need for research on this area, the present study aimed to examine the searching behaviors of Hong Kong web users regarding tourism products. A purposive sampling of 30 interviewees indicated their various expectations from different travel websites. The search behavior of these individuals was also identified. Relevant implications for marketers are presented in this paper to enable them to fully understand the behavioral patterns of Hong Kong web users in searching for tourism information.

Keywords: tourism website, tourism information, search preferences, Hong Kong

1. Introduction

The development of information technology has dramatically changed the daily lives of people and even the entire society, including travelers' search for information in planning their trips. Correspondingly, the Internet has become one of the major sources of tourism information (Kim et al., 2007).

The growing acceptance and use of increasing valuable travel tools have prompted the tourism and hospitality industry to enter a critical phase in their business-to-customer online environments (Mills & Law, 2004). With the continuous growth of the population who regularly surf the Internet, the World Wide Web (WWW) has become an indispensable channel for people to seek tourism information (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Customers believe that e-searching cannot only provide convenience and increase product value through price comparison, but it may also offer enjoyable consumption possibilities because e-shopping experience can also provide rich consumer value (Sigala, 2004).

According to the Euromonitor International Report (2013), the sales of travel and tourism products in 2012 became crucial to outbound travelers in Hong Kong. The advancement of the distribution sector of the tourism industry enabled the industry to provide travel intermediaries with greater power to influence and direct consumer demand compared with their counterparts in other industries (Sharpley, 2004). Consumers enjoy using online platforms to gain substantial information about products and services for their outbound travels prior to making a purchase. This condition signifies that the influence of online channels on outbound tourism remains relatively strong, particularly in Hong Kong.

The number of Internet users in Hong Kong in June 2012 reached 5,329,372 (see Table 1). This value was equivalent to 74.5% of the entire population of the city. From 2000 to 2012, the number of Internet users in Hong Kong increased by 40.4% (Internet World Stats, 2012).

Table 1. Internet usage and population statistics, Hong Kong 2000-2012

Year	Users	Population	% Pop.	Usage Source
2000	2,283,000	6,702,500	34.1%	ITU
2005	4,878,713	6,898,686	70.7%	Nielsen/Net Ratings
2008	4,878,713	7,018,636	69.5%	Nielsen/Net Ratings
2010	4,878,713	7,089,705	68.8%	Nielsen/Net Ratings
2012	5,329,372	7,153,519	74.5%	IWS

Source: Internet World Statistics, 2012.

Online travel sales to Hong Kong indicate that the residents of the city rapidly increased from 2008 to 2013 (see Table 2). Online travel sales each year increased by at least HKD \$10-million (Euromonitor International, 2014).

Table 2. Online travel sales to country residents in Hong Kong from 2008 to 2013.

Hong Kong, China	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Online Travel Sales to Country Residents	5,227.1	6,720.0	7,226.0	8298.0	9,880.6	12,101.3

Source: Euromonitor International, 2014

About 2.4 billion people around the world use the Internet, and 1.07 billion of this number are in Asia. Thus, Asia, particularly Hong Kong, has the highest incidence of Internet access for airline ticket purchases (Alamdari, 2002). The growing Internet usage has highlighted the importance or need to understand the searching behavior of web users.

This study attempted to investigate Hong Kong customers' online using preference, made use of qualitative method for in-depth elaboration in customers' their behavior in on-line searching. The first part included the study objectives, further discussion highlighted the conceptual framework and methodology. The findings identified the respondents toward online tourism product search. The last part provided new findings and implication in this study.

1.1 Study Rationale

The global spread of tourism has benefited the economic and employment sectors of industrialized and developed countries, including the telecommunication and agricultural sectors. According to the Consumer Council in 2013, they received a total of 336 complaints related to the online purchase of airline tickets in the first 10 months of 2013, which is equivalent to 233% increase from the 101 cases in the previous year. Online booking and purchase of tourism products are undoubtedly efficient and convenient, but they sometimes incur communication problems that could easily arise from misunderstanding and dispute. The number of web users has dramatically increased in recent years, but many of these users are disinclined to provide sensitive personal information online because they do not completely trust e-commerce security. Therefore, this study explores the online tourism information search behavior to understand the comprehensive search process. In particular, this study investigates the activities and search experiences of online consumers of tourism products and how such activities sequentially occur during their search.

This examines the behavior of online customers and aims to understand the key factor in their decision making. Customers are important to the success of tourism businesses. Thus, marketers should understand how the psychological aspects of customers affect their online preferences and their behaviors and attitudes within the domain of travel-related information. Marketers should also investigate the major implications to practitioners from better understand to the customers searching behavior. Several studies have indicated that online customers primarily search for tourism information to support their decision making and product choice because information search behavior strengthens their decision making and choice behavior (Pearce, Schott, Seabra, Abrantes, & Lages, 2007). However, only a few studies have investigated the preference of Hong Kong customers in searching for tourism products online. This matter should be comprehensively discussed because it could benefit marketers and help practitioners design efficient marketing, advertising, and communication strategies.

To investigate consumer preferences in online tourism product search, this research aims to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) To examine how the perspectives of customers affect their own perception toward using online tourism product search;
- 2) To identify the fundamental dimension for online searching process from different perspectives and
- 3) To examine the barriers and facilitators of travel websites and make recommendations for the marketers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Nature of Tourism Product

Tourism products cannot be tested and controlled in advance. The decision to acquire and consume these products is separated in time and space. Nonetheless, the issue of distance can be addressed by customers by searching for information about these products. Nelson (1999) specified that search qualities are elements that can be determined by consumer prior to making a purchase, whereas experience qualities are those that cannot be determined prior to purchase. Tourism organizations rely on the exchange of information for functional needs, such as accommodation planning and other travel needs (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1988). Previous studies show that travelers use various information sources to arrange their trips, such as personal experience, travel agencies, guide books, magazines, and newspapers. This substantial information is influenced by different search contingencies and individual characteristics (Fodness & Murray, 1998).

Moreover, tourism product is a heterogenous product that refers to a set of basic products supplied by numerous tourism suppliers and organizations. These products are well-defined and are designed to match the varying needs and wants of consumers. For example, airline products include packages for airline tickets, hotel accommodations, and sightseeing attractions for independent customers such as young people and families. This product can be mapped for various target groups and provide different attributes to the interests of consumers. Moreover, tourism products are perishable and cannot be stored. If a hotel room cannot be sold on a certain day, then its income will be lost. Tourism products are also intangible; they can neither be tasted nor felt before purchase (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2010). Suppliers are at high risks and are vulnerable if the consumers are unaware of their product offerings. If marketers understand the needs and wants of their consumers, then consumer risk can be reduced by suppliers or intermediaries by accessing related information about the availability of inventory. Therefore, a relevant information dissemination strategy should be developed.

2.2 Understanding Website Usability

Previous scholars posited that website usability can be used by specific users to achieve goals in a particular environment with high effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction (Travis, 2003; Nielsen 1999). A comprehensive list of components of website usability indicates that the term refers to the ease of searching for information with regard to the interface, design, and reduced errors of a travel website. Website usability can provide effectiveness in term of use and satisfaction through its interface. However, several web designs have committed serious mistakes (Nielsen, 1999). Poor usability causes inconvenience in the use of travel websites and adversely affects the image of travel organizations. Leporinie and Paterno (2003) identified 16 basic criteria for improving the usability and effectiveness of websites to satisfy their users. Other researchers (Udo & Marquis, 2001; Lynch & Horton, 2001; Bevan, 2001; Wan, 2002) developed the attributes of website usability that could make online navigation user-friendly. Therefore, website usability in all dimensions of their agencies was improved. Considering the popularity of online tourism product search, the present study examines the information seeking behavior of Hong Kong consumers and provides marketers with substantial information on how they could design their website to increase its usability.

2.3 Tourism Information Search

The Internet has gained considerable importance as a communicative and adaptive means of sharing and disseminating information (Kim et al., 2007). The use of computer differs from that of television, radio, newspaper, and magazine because of the design and technology upon which they function. From the business perspective, websites serve as a novel means for marketers to reduce marketing cost, transform relationship, open new platforms, streamline processes, and contribute to shareholder value (Oliva, 1998). From the consumer's perspective, websites affect the information environment and consumer behavior in an unprecedented manner because of the unique features of the Internet (e.g., speed of accessibility, provision of interactive assistance, and flexibility in representing information) (Dholakis & Baozzi, 2001). A previous study on online user activities (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2004) reported that 78% and 71% of men and women, respectively, believe that the Internet is a good place to make transactions. An effective website can successfully deliver relevant messages to its audiences. From the marketers' perspective, a good tourism

website design can communicate with potential visitors or customers and can best deliver the message through the online platform.

2.3.1 Internal Tourism Information Search Preferences

Tourism information search can be classified into internal and external information searches. Previous studies claimed that a person performs an internal information search by reviewing his/her personal experiences with a certain or similar destination (Chen & Gursoy, 2000; Fodness & Murray, 1997; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Internal search scans the long-term memory for related product knowledge and even conducts external searches. Beatty and Smith (1987) specified that people always try to search for information in their first memory; when their internal information sources cannot provide the specific and adequate information, consumers attempt to collect information from external sources. The prior knowledge is accumulated through ongoing search (Schul & Crompton, 1983). Hence, this knowledge plays a precedent role in tourism information search.

2.3.2 External Tourism Information Search Preferences

External information search can be realized through various channels, and travelers tend to use numerous sources as their means to seek information. This search preference adopts an extensive search that includes family and friends, destination-specific literature, mass media, and travel agencies. Travelers consider various information sources, such as word-of-mouth, advertisements, or professional advice, to determine their perceptual and cognitive aspects in evaluating tourist destinations. Apart from the above-mentioned information sources, third-party referrals (e.g., local residents) can also be a highly relevant source of information because of their expertise and trustworthiness (Rompf & Ricci, 2005).

Based on these information searches, Fodness and Murray (1997) conceptualized tourism information search as a dynamic process, in which customers use numerous values and types of information search in response to the internal and external contingencies of their travel planning. Moreover, Fodness and Murray (1997) conducted their investigation in consideration of the increased attention paid to the investigation of tourism information search preferences from the search process perspective; they also reviewed prior works on these issues and as well as on tourism information search through the Internet to explore the identified search patterns and behavior of customers regarding their online tourism search. Many studies assert that people search for tourism information primarily to support their decision making and to minimize risk and uncertainties in their online purchases and booking. The product choice and information search preferences of customers strengthen their own decision making and choice behavior (Bettman, 1979; Rompf & Ricci, 2005). The Internet technology and search for tourism information are widely used by travelers when they plan their trips. Moreover, the progress in information communications technology has been changing, which has influenced the online tourism information search and preferences of travelers.

2.4 Understanding Information Search Behavior from a User Perspective

Several researchers in the field of library science (e.g., Ellis, 1989; Marchionini, 1995; Kuhlthau, 1987, 1988; Wilson, 1981) have proposed theoretical models in terms of the patterns of information seeking and information behavior. These models focus on the perspective of users toward the degree in which they exhibit common characteristics of information preferences in the different stages of the information seeking process. The perceptions of information seekers are viewed as constructs that developed over time through their prior knowledge on a problem and by their prior search experiences. These perceptions may be reflected upon, defined, and explained to further examine the search behavior of website users. Kuhlthau (1988) developed a six-stage model of the user's search process, in which the sequence of thoughts, actions, and feelings is commonly experienced in a search information. The six stages of this model are task initiation, topic selection, focus exploration and formulation, information collection, and search conclusion. Ellis (1989) proposed that a behavioral model of the information seeking patterns can be divided into six characteristics, namely, starting, chaining, browsing, differentiating, monitoring, and extracting. These characteristics categorize the principal generic features into different individual patterns, which constitute a complete behavioral model.

2.5 Web Search Strategies

A study on information science investigated the search experiences of web users and revealed a reasonably coherent picture of web search behavior (Carroll, 1999). The web search characteristics are the search strategies commonly used by information seekers. These characteristics also refer to the associated activities that mostly appear during an online search process. These web searching strategies, which adopt keywords, search engines, websites, subject directory, and acclaimed sites have been identified in prior studies. Each of these strategies is comprehensively analyzed in the primary data section.

2.6 Effects of Prior Knowledge and Search Experiences on WWW Search

When a search task is involved, the search experiences significantly affect the search experiences in using the WWW. The web users who have high level of search experience plan for their search for information according to their knowledge of the web; by contrast, beginners hardly plan and only rely on external representations (Navarro-Prieto, Scaife, & Rogers, 1999). In terms of efficiency in the hypertext system, domain expertise increases search performance (Marchionini, 1995; McDonald & Stevenson, 1998; Patel, Drury, & Shalin, 1998). Under this rationale, expert web users consume less time in completing their search tasks and gathering numerous correct solutions compared with beginners.

This study mainly identifies the preferences and search behavior of web users in seeking tourism information. The results of this study are expected to fill the gaps in literature, provide conceptualization of the online tourism information search behavior, and enable research information to explore and understand the relationships formed on various information search activities.

The four major groups of studies related to website search are: (1) tourism information search, (2) understanding information search behavior from the perspective of web users, (3) literature regarding web search strategies, and the (4) effect of prior knowledge and search experiences on WWW search (MacGregor, 1999). By nature, tourism is an information-oriented phenomenon caused by structural reasons (Schertler, Schmid, Tjoa, & Werthner, 1995). Hence, for consumers, consuming and making decisions with regard to tourism products are separated in time and place. Correspondingly, information quality is considered a major research topic; thus, providing meaningful relevant information search experiences is extremely important for the success of tourism organizations. Chang, Lin, and Chen (2012) explored how web users initiate their tourism information search process preferences and operate the related mechanism.

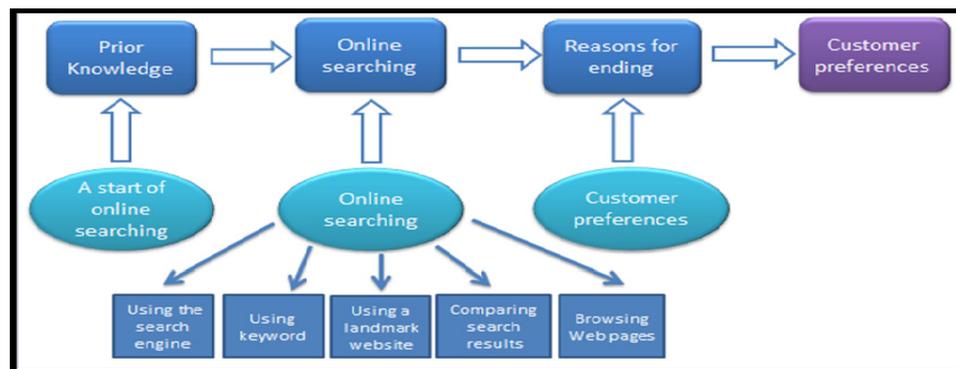


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

Source: Chang, Lin, & Chen, 2012.

3. Methodology

This study conducted a descriptive research with a qualitative approach. Descriptive research designs collect evidence that helps the researcher determine the “who,” “what,” and “where” of single or multiple cases (Yin, 2003). This study collected data by conducting in-depth interviews with 30 respondents. A research conducted with open-ended questions has advantages in terms of high participation, in-depth opinions, instant feedback opportunities, and interaction between the interviewer and interviewees.

All participants of this study were invited. They gave their consent two months before the interview. Purposive sampling was adopted for this study. Purposive sampling is a sampling method that selects the most “information rich” respondent who could help achieve the research objectives (Patton, 2002). The sampling size of 30 was determined by theoretical saturation (Mason, 2010). To provide rich opinions and comments, the respondents were asked to perform an online tourism product search. The interviewees should have online search experiences within the last six months before the interview to enhance the credibility of the research findings.

The questionnaire was constructed using the back-translation method to make the questions comprehensible in both languages. The questions were reviewed by two tourism practitioners on January 2015 to ensure that they would be fully understood by the respondents. Primary and secondary data were both collected. Primary data were gathered through in-depth interviews, whereas secondary data were collected through various channels,

including journals and industry reports.

Interview period started from end of January to March 2015. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in full to provide accurate records for analysis. Open-ended questions were asked in the interviews to gain insights into the search behavior of the subjects and to uncover their perceptions toward online tourism information search. Content analysis was used to discuss the results. The presentation of the data provides the results with a summary marked down after each interview to record the research information given by every interviewee, including a summary of interview contents and a reference after each interview. The collected information was sequentially numbered and recorded in the form of a document summary. The notes and memos for data collection were prepared in advance. Raw data were used in the analysis to prepare and facilitate familiarity with coding under various themes. The coding results are presented in the display chart by distinct categories for further elaboration.

4. Finding and Discussion

This study followed the theoretical saturation of Strauss and Corbin (1998) when no additional new findings were observed. Of the 30 participants interviewed, 9 were males and 21 were females. The age of the participants ranged from 26 to 40 years. Table 3 shows the profile of the interviewees. Majority of the respondents have visited travel websites in the last six months on an average of one to five times or more. The average time spent for browsing and searching the websites varied between 1 and 1.5 hours or more. Except for three interviewees, most of the respondents have purchased travel products online. The data also revealed that 25 of the 30 interviewees had travel experience within the last six months.

Table 3. Profile of the interviewees

Participant Code	Sex	Age	Number of travel related websites visited in last six months	Average frequencies of travel websites visited in last six months	Average time spent browsing and searching travel websites	Online purchasing experiences of travel products	Traveling experiences in last six months
P1	F	36–40	3	2–3	30 min to 60 min	Yes	Yes
P2	F	31–35	3	2–3	30 min to 60 min	Yes	Yes
P3	F	31–35	4	4–5	1 h to 1.5 h	Yes	Yes
P4	M	36–40	4	2–3	30 min to 60 min	Yes	No
P5	F	26–30	3	2–3	30 min to 60 min	Yes	Yes
P6	F	31–35	3	2–3	30 min to 60 min	Yes	Yes
P7	F	31–35	3	2–3	30 min to 60 min	Yes	Yes
P8	F	36–40	3	4–5	30 min to 60 min	Yes	Yes
P9	F	36–40	4	2–3	30 min to 60 min	Yes	Yes
P10	F	31–35	3	2–3	30 min to 60 min	Yes	Yes
P11	F	36–40	3	4–5	30 min to 60 min	Yes	Yes
P12	M	36–40	3	2–3	30 min to 60 min	Yes	No
P13	M	31–35	3	2–3	30 min or below	Yes	Yes
P14	F	31–35	3	2–3	1 h to 1.5 h	Yes	Yes
P15	F	26–30	3	4–5	30 min to 60 min	Yes	Yes
P16	F	31–35	4	2–3	30 min to 60 min	Yes	Yes
P17	M	31–35	4	2–3	30 min or below	Yes	Yes
P18	F	31–35	4	2–3	30 min to 60 min	Yes	Yes
P19	F	31–35	4	4–5	1 h to 1.5 h	Yes	Yes
P20	M	31–35	3	2–3	30 min or below	Yes	No
P21	M	31–35	1	1	30 min or below	No	No
P22	M	36–40	2	2–3	30 min to 60 min	Yes	Yes
P23	F	26–30	5 or above	4–5	1.5 h or above	Yes	Yes
P24	M	31–35	4	2–3	30 min to 60 min	Yes	Yes
P25	F	31–35	2	2–3	30 min or below	Yes	Yes
P26	F	26–30	5 or above	4–5	30 min to 60 min	Yes	Yes
P27	M	26–30	5 or above	4–5	1 h to 1.5 h	Yes	Yes
P28	F	26–30	5 or above	4–5	30 min to 60 min	No	No
P29	F	31–35	3	2–3	30 min or below	Yes	Yes
P30	F	31–35	2	None	30 min or below	No	Yes

The results summary in the data display chart (see Figure 2) are classified into four major categories (i.e., start of online searching, online searching purpose, reasons for ending search, and searching outcomes) to subsume satisfactorily the essential characteristics of the tourism information search behavior of respondents. The data display chart describes the tourism information search behavior of respondents through the Internet and other information channels. The research results show that findings on the effects of prior knowledge and search experiences on WWW search are divided into four core areas, which can be categorized and used to identify the key findings of this study.

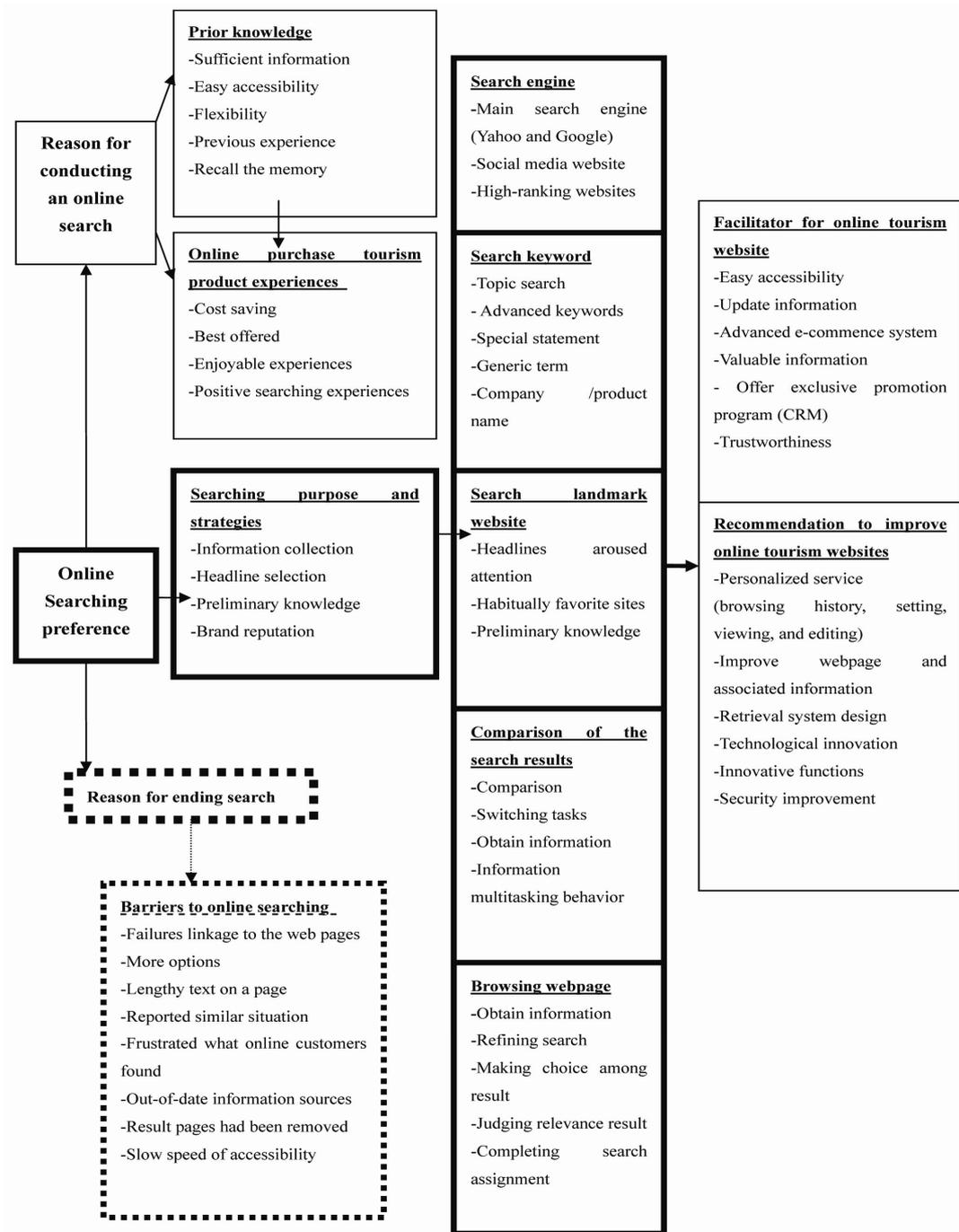


Figure 2. The preference of the respondents toward online tourism product search

4.2 Start of Online Search

4.2.1 Prior Knowledge and Online Purchase Experiences of Tourism Products

The results show that web users prefer to obtain sufficient information and easy accessibility and flexibility in searching for online tourism products based on their prior knowledge. Besides, many interviewees mentioned that the products being sold online have more reasonable prices than those available at travel agencies. Therefore, the respondents asserted that they saved on cost and obtained good price and best offers through online purchases because of their past experiences. This case signifies that web users rely on their memories from the beginning of the search task. These individuals engage in internal information search (including online search experiences in the past) to determine the best means for them to begin a new search task. Prior successful search should motivate these web users to complete such a search task. The prior knowledge of online travelers in terms of travel, as well as their previous search experiences, positively influences their continuous online search for travel information for their next travel plan.

4.3 Online Search Purpose and Search Strategies

People visit travel websites based on different criteria. Travelers use five search strategies (i.e., search engine, search keywords, using landmark websites, comparison of search results, and browsing web pages) to search for tourism product information through the Internet and to process and record such information. A traveler visits online travel websites based on several criteria, including information collection, headline selection, preliminary knowledge, and brand reputation.

This observation implies that web users visit travel websites based on specific criteria because they expect to obtain relevant information. The five common search strategies for seeking information through the Internet were classified into search engine, use of keywords, a landmark website, comparison of search results, and browsing webpage. In deciding which among the various search strategies should be used, a web user considers the amount of effort or amount of information involved. Web users acquire some ideas about what they are looking for and what they should do in online searching.

4.3.1 Use of Search Engine

Search engines provide access to considerable information available on the web. Most web users begin their online searches using Yahoo and Google. Google has been ranked as the No. 1 portal website. Online travelers also use social media websites (e.g., Facebook) to search travel-related information. However, web users face several hit lists or unrelated information on search engines. To facilitate their searches, web users utilize two or more search engines instead of using only one search engine to seek tourism information.

4.3.2 Using Keywords

Web users can determine the best tourism information by entering a keyword or sets of keywords (e.g., topic search, advanced keyword, or specific statement). The interviewees stated that in most cases, they input a name in the search engine to begin their search. If such a name does not reveal satisfactory result pages, they retrieve the initial page to start a new search. The keywords that indicate the generic terms or broad categories represent tourism to search for information. This case implies that web users try to express the same concept by using different keywords in the search box. Web users believe that specific statements can help them look for good sites that could fulfill their needs.

4.3.3 Using a Landmark Website

The interviewees asserted that the best consideration from a landmark site is either the portal website or their habitually favorite site. Yahoo not only serves as a search engine, but it also acts as a dominant portal website for web users to look for information by clicking the headlines or subject categories. The result indicates that the most frequently clicked category by online travelers is “travel” for the start of a search. This category can be classified into several sub-categories, including accommodations, flights, or vacations.

4.3.4 Comparison of Search Results

Many interviewees specified that the main purpose for comparing the search results, that is, information multitasking, is the condition that web users can handle the demands of multiple tasks on top of searching for information (e.g., human behavior regarding switching between tasks and the ordering of multiple tasks). This study showed that essential tourism information is frequently obtained and compared. To check if the content of the search results is suitable and correct, web users tend to browse two or more web pages within the information categories on a website. Moreover, the price of products/services searches for screening alternatives online and for making comparisons among the selected alternatives are commonly used by web users.

4.3.5 Browsing Web Pages

Web users browse numerous web pages to obtain information, refine their search, make decision based on the search results, and dedicate their goal of completing the search assignment. The interviewees reported that many web users first scan the travel websites before jumping from one site to another when they have several sites to visit. These web users also go back to their previously visited sites to ensure that they did not overlook or miss any important information. The research respondents affirmed that they adopt different search tactics instead of using only a single search method to seek tourism information through the Internet. Moreover, web users alternatively employ search strategies to retrieve previously web pages or to re-activate their executed searches.

4.4 Reasons for Ending Search

4.4.1 Difficulty and Barriers to Online Search

The respondents reported that among the difficulties they encounter in their online search, out-of-date information is the most inconvenient one. For example, the web users sometimes find some information that does not correspond to their needs, and they correspondingly click on another site to continue their information search. Some interviewees claimed that slow Internet connection is another disturbance to their online search. This case makes web users impatient, and the failure to link the web pages is a commonly encountered problem in online search. All the above factors are regarded as challenges faced by web users in their search for tourism information through the Internet. In this situation, the web users are forced to end their online search activities or to change their search strategies because of the connection problems on the websites. Moreover, web users end their online search because they fail to obtain the fundamental information that could fulfill their needs.

4.5 Search Outcomes

4.5.1 Expectation and Recommendation for Online Tourism Product Websites

After the interviews were completed, we determined the results that could help travel websites improve the design of their web pages, the ease of accessibility, up-to-date information, Internet security, and advanced e-commerce system. Some interviewees stated that they expect tourism organizations to offer valuable information and personal services, particularly in the loyalty program. Contrarily, other respondents prefer to enjoy stable and quick Internet connection while they search on a certain webpage. Understanding the behaviors of web users in online tourism information search can contribute to the development of effective customer-driven marketing concepts and campaigns, such as personalized or exclusive services.

4.5.2 Internet Security System

Majority of the interviewees perceived that the Internet security system of travel websites significantly and positively affect their trust and loyalty to such websites when shopping for tourism products and services. This condition is linked to the problem statement of this study. Online transactions ushered in a new era for the online tourism industry, which aims to develop advanced instruments for commercial practices. Under this situation, customers are concerned about the Internet security system when they purchase tourism products through online travel websites. As such, improving Internet security can enhance the confidence of consumers in online shopping and can increase the amount of travel information available on the web.

4.6 Significant New Findings

4.6.1 Gender Differences in Online Travel Information Search

The results of this study revealed that the information search processes and decision making of the males significantly vary from those of the females.

Table 4. The gender differences in online search tourism information processing

Differences	Male	Female
Website searching at one time	Visit two to three websites	Visit four to five websites
Duration browsing on the website	-30 minutes	-60 minutes
Personality trait in searching website	-Independent -Confident -Willing to take risks	-Dependent -Less confident -Unwilling to take risks
Searching behavior	-Relies on their own opinion and make decision quickly -Focuses on objective cues and physical attributes	-Relies on different sources before making a decision -Focuses on details and subjective attributes

The search preferences and duration of females vary from those of males. In particular, females prefer to visit four to five travel websites on average at one time, whereas males visit only two to three websites. Females are more involved in online travel information search than males. Thus, females visit several travel websites frequently.

The search duration of females is 1 hour or even more than that of males. Male web users do not spend a huge amount of time for information search, and they rely on highly available information than to evaluate judgment and decision making. In terms of personality traits (e.g., risk taking), males tend to be more independent and confident than females who are less willing to take risks and are doubtful in every single transaction. Female web users are prone to perceive product risks. In terms of searching behavior, males rely on their own opinions and make decisions quickly, whereas females rely on numerous different sources and information before making decisions. Travel marketers should understand the differences among these genders when designing an effective website for tourism products.

5. Implication and Conclusion

Several recommendations for the practitioners, web designers, and marketers are presented in this section. First, most web searchers believe that websites can provide sufficient information and easy accessibility. The search behavior of these individuals is influenced by their own previous search experience. Thus, marketers should develop a user-friendly system and provide sophisticated updated information to capture the repeated search and browsing behavior of users. Second, travel websites must provide users with valuable information. Hence, marketers should offer numerous exclusive promotion programs, implement customer relationship management, and engage with loyal customers. Third, tourism websites can provide users with personalized services by reviewing the buying history of their customers and by considering their comments and suggestions. Fourth, online security is one of the issues that concern web users. Accordingly, the security of web pages must be enhanced in terms of payment or guarantee issue to reduce the buying risks of their users. Finally, travel websites must be incorporated with innovative functions to provide an incentive for their users, continuously track the website to dismiss the outdated tourism information, and provide users with positive experiences.

The most significant contribution of this study is the identification of gender differences in terms of search behavior. Therefore, this study provides web designers with valuable information. This study also provides a comprehensive recommendation for tourism marketers in Hong Kong by presenting a road map where they can design a competitive website to engage with their potential and existing customers.

Despite its significant contributions to literature, this study has limitations, and some research areas should be addressed for further research. Future studies can extend to different age groups from a boarder geographical area. Future studies can also compare the views of the web users of different age groups.

References

- Alamdari, F. (2002). Regional development in airlines and travel agents relationships. *Air Transport Journal*, 339-348. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0969-6997\(02\)00014-5](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0969-6997(02)00014-5)
- Beatty, S. E., & Smith, S. (1987). External information search: an investigation across several product categories. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14, 83-95.
- Bettman, J. R. (1979). *Information processing theory of consumer choice*. Boston: Addison-Wesley.
- Bevan, N. (2001). How to Design a Customer-friendly Online Store: Usability Guidelines. *Usability Services*. Retrieved from <http://www.usability.serco.com/research/research.htm>
- Buhalis, D. (2003). *eTourism: Information technology for strategic tourism management*. London: Prentice Hall.
- Buhalis, D., & Law, R. (2008). Progress in information technology and tourism management: 20 years on and 10 years after the Internet—the state of eTourism research. *Tourism Management*, 29, 609-623. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2008.01.005>
- Carroll, J. B. (1999). Expert Internet information access. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 20(3).
- Chang, H., Lin, M., & Chen, H. (2012) Web users' behavioural patterns of tourism information search: From online to offline. *Tourism Management*, (33), 1468-1482. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2012.01.016>
- Chen, J. S., & Gursoy, D. (2000). Cross-cultural comparison of the information sources used by first-time and repeat travelers and its marketing implications. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 19(2), 191-203.
- Consumer Council press release. (2013). Complaints against Online Flight Booking Fast on the Rise. Retrieved

- from http://www.consumer.org.hk/website/ws_en/news/press_releases/p44604.html
- Dholakis, U., & Baggiozzi, R. (2001). Consumer behavior in digital environments. In J. Wind & V. Mahajan (Eds.), *Digital marketing* (pp. 163-200). New York: Wiley.
- Ellis, D. (1989). A behavioural approach to information retrieval system design. *Journal of Documentation*, 45(3), 171-212.
- Euromonitor International. (2013). *Travel and Tourism in Hong Kong, China*. Retrieved from <http://www.portal.euromonitor.com.eproxy.vtclib9.vtc.edu.hk:2048/portal/analysis/tab>
- Fodness, D., & Murray, B. (1997). Tourist information search. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 24(3), 503-523. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(97\)00009-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(97)00009-1)
- Fodness, D., & Murray, B. (1998). A typology of tourist information search strategies. *Journal of Travel Research*, 37, 108-119. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/004728759803700202>
- Internet World Stats. (2012). *Internet usage statistics: World internet users and population stats*. Retrieved from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>
- Kim, D., Lehto, X., & Morrison, A. (2007). Gender differences in online travel information. *Tourism Management*, 28, 423-433. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2006.04.001>
- Kotler, P., Bowen, J. T., & Makens, J. C. (2010). *Marketing for Hospitality and Tourism* (4th ed.). Pearson International Edition.
- Kuhlthau, C. C. (1987). An emerging theory of library instruction. *School Library Media Quarterly*, 16(1), 23-28.
- Kuhlthau, C. C. (1988). Developing a model of the library search process: cognitive and affective aspects. *Reference Quarterly*, 28, 232-242.
- Leporini, B., & Paterno, F. (2003). Criteria for Usability of Accessible Web Sites. In N. Carbonell & C. Stephanidis (Eds.), *Universal Access: Theoretical Perspectives, Practice, and Experience: 7th ERCIM International Workshop on User Interfaces for All, Paris, France, October 24-25, 2002* (pp. 43-55). Berlin, New York: Springer.
- Lynch, P. J., & Horton, S. (2001). *Web Style Guide: Basic Design Principles for Creating Web Sites*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- MacGregor, S. K. (1999). Hypermedia navigation profiles: cognitive characteristics and information processing strategies. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 20(2), 189-206. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2190/1MEC-C0W6-111H-YQ6A>
- Marchionini, G. (1995). *Information seeking in electronic environments*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- McDonald, S., & Stevenson, R. J. (1998). Navigation in hyperspace: an evaluation of the effects of navigation tools and subject matter expertise on browsing and information retrieval in hypertext. *Interacting with Computers*, 10, 129-142. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0953-5438\(98\)00017-4](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0953-5438(98)00017-4)
- Mills, J., & Law, R. (2004). *Handbook of Consumer Behavior, Tourism, and the Internet*. New York: Harworth Hospitality Press.
- Navarro-Prieto, R., Scaife, M., & Rogers, Y. (1999). Cognitive strategies in web searching. *Proceedings of 5th conference on human factors and the web*. Retrieved from <http://zing.ncsl.nist.gov/hfweb/proceedings/navarro-prieto/index.html>
- Nielsen, J. (1999). The Top Ten New Mistakes of Web Design. *Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox*. Retrieved from <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/90530.html>
- Oliva, R. A. (1998). Playing the 'Web Wild Cards'. *Marketing Management*, 7(1), 51-54.
- Patel, S. C., Drury, C. G., & Shalin, V. L. (1998). Effectiveness of expert semantic knowledge as a navigational aid within hypertext. *Behavior and Information Technology*, 17(6), 313-324. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/014492998119274>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pearce, D. G., & Schott, C. (2005). Tourism distribution channels: the visitors' perspective. *Journal of Travel Research*, 44, 50-63.
- Pew Internet & American Life Project. (2004). The Internet and daily life (online). Retrieved from

<http://www.pewinternet.org>

- Rompf, P., & Ricci, P. (2005). Gratuitous referrals: a subset of visitor search activities, and decision strategies at destination for travel-related services. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 18(2), 39-52. http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J073v18n02_04
- Rompf, P., DiPietro, R. B., & Ricci, P. (2005). Locals' involvement in travelers' information search and venue decision strategies while at destination. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 18(3), 11-22. http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J073v18n03_02
- Schertler, W., Schmid, B., Tjoa, A. M., & Werthner, H. (1995). *Information and communication technologies in tourism*. New York.
- Schul, P., & Crompton, J. (1983). Search behavior of international vacationers: Travel-specific lifestyle and Socio demographic variables. *Journal of Travel Research*, 22, 25-31. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/004728758302200206>
- Seabra, C., Abrantes, J. L., & Lages, L. F. (2007). The impact of using non-media information sources on future use of mass media information sources: the mediating role of expectations fulfillments. *Tourism Management*, (28), 1541-1554. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2007.02.008>
- Sharpley, R. (2004). *The Tourism Business: an introduction Business* (2nd ed.). Education Publishers.
- Sigala, M. (2004). Using Data Envelopment Analysis for Measuring and Benchmarking Productivity in the Hotel Sector. *Journal Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 16, 39-60. http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J073v16n02_04
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures; for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Travis, D. (2003). *E-commerce Usability: Tools and Techniques to Perfect the On-line Experience*. London, New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Udo, G. J., & Marquis, G. P. (2002). Factors Affecting E-commerce Web Site Effectiveness. *Journal of Computer Information System*, 42(2), 10-16.
- Vogt, C. A., & Fesenmaier, D. R. (1998). Expanding the functional information search model. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 25(3), 551-578. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(98\)00010-3](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(98)00010-3)
- Wan, C. S. (2002). The web sites of international tourist hotels and tour wholesalers in Taiwan. *Tourism Management*, 23, 155-160. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177\(01\)00048-6](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177(01)00048-6)
- Wilson, T. D. (1981). On user studies and information needs. *Journal of Documentation*, 37(1), 3-15. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/eb026702>
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).